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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 001779

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [MY](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: PHILIPPINE NATIONALS DEPORTED FROM MALAYSIA

REF: MANILA 1697 (PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT TO SIGN
TERRITORIAL AGREEMENT WITH MUSLIM INSURGENTS)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The southern Philippines is bracing for a massive influx of deported Filipinos following the Malaysian government's June 25 announcement of an immigration crackdown against undocumented foreign workers in Sabah, East Malaysia. Hundreds of thousands of Filipinos, many of whom hail from the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao, reside in the natural-resource-rich province of Sabah on Borneo Island. So far, at least 500 deportees have arrived in Zamboanga City, threatening to overtax the city's ability to absorb the influx. The Malaysian crackdown came on the heels of inflammatory statements by a popular and unpredictable Filipino former Muslim insurgent leader, threatening to bring the Philippines territorial claim to Sabah to the International Court of Justice. While a perception exists in the Philippines that the deportations are related to the Philippine dormant claim to Sabah, they are more likely the result of internal political pressures in Malaysia. This cable has been coordinated with Embassy Kuala Lumpur and contains an Embassy Kuala Lumpur comment in paragraph 6. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Over the past week, at least 500 deportees arrived in Zamboanga from Sabah by vessel. One deportee told the local press upon his arrival that "everyone - women, children, babies, men - is being arrested" on Sabah. Local government units in Zamboanga City are providing assistance to the deportees, including food and temporary shelter. However, Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat and other government officials are becoming increasingly concerned over the city's limited capacity to accommodate large numbers of deportees. Prominent experts have warned that "in the absence of clear and viable alternatives, these returnees may be left with little choice but to return illegally to Sabah or join the rebels and bandits hiding in the jungles of Mindanao."

¶3. (SBU) A former Labor Undersecretary noted that the Philippine Embassy in Kuala Lumpur lacks the necessary personnel and resources to assist the large numbers of Filipinos likely to be detained and deported during the immigration crackdown. The former senior official appealed to Malaysian authorities to treat the undocumented workers humanely so as to avoid potential human rights violations, similar to those experienced during mass deportations of illegal Filipino immigrants from Sabah during 2001.

¶4. (C) Embassy contacts in the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) faction led by Nur Misuari and the Sultanate of Sulu are claiming that the latest immigration crackdown is part of a Malaysian strategy to pressure the Philippine government into opening a consulate on Sabah -- a development

that would effectively end the decades old dormant Philippines territorial claim to the island of Sabah, Malaysia. While the Philippine and Malaysian governments have yet to make any official statements, members of the MNLF and Sultanate of Sulu contend that the Sabah claim is interwoven with Muslim insurgency and terrorism issues, and must be resolved for there to be lasting peace and security in the Sulu Archipelago. Consequently, the popular and unpredictable Misuari and several self-proclaimed Sulu Sultans -- Fuad Kiram and Esmael Kiram -- have pledged to bring the Sabah claim to the United Nations International Court of Justice for resolution.

¶5. (C) Comment: The Philippine claim to Sabah is a politically sensitive and emotionally charged issue that remains in the shadows of the Philippine-Malaysia bilateral relationship and Mindanao peace process. In the words of one prominent Filipino politician, "the Philippines' claim to Sabah is written in warriors' blood, not ink." This latest immigration crackdown came on the heels of MNLF chairman Misuari and Sulu Sultan Kiram's speeches in Mindanao about restoring Philippine sovereignty and proprietary rights over Sabah, creating an impression of linkage in the Philippines. Of the thousands of Philippine nationals expected to suffer displacement, those interviewed by media are saying they will return illegally to Sabah, where they can find employment. End Comment.

¶6. (C) Embassy Kuala Lumpur Comment: Malaysia's announced expulsion of illegal Filipinos (and Indonesians) from Sabah is not related to pressure on the Philippines government, but is in response to political demands from Sabahans for Federal

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authorities to take action against the enormous illegal migrant influx in their state. Prime Minister Abdullah's continued majority in Parliament depends in no small measure on Sabah MPs remaining loyal, increasing the leverage Sabah leaders have over Kuala Lumpur at this juncture. To placate Sabah, the government recently decided on the expulsions, which are to be completed by the end of August. With no significant institutional change, no meaningful increase in border control, and no crack-down on official corruption, this expulsion exercise -- with its clear humanitarian cost -- will end like those carried out previously every three or four years, namely with the return of undocumented migrants from the Philippines and Indonesia to meet Sabah's demand for cheap labor.

¶7. (SBU) This cable has been cleared by Embassy Kuala Lumpur.

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KENNEY